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SUBJECT: THE GVN, UBCV AND BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

REF: HCMC 523 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) The GVN went to great lengths to highlight its support for the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) commemoration of the annual Buddha's Birthday ("Vesak") celebrations on May 31. The VBS events were well covered by HCMC media, which reported extensively on President Nguyen Minh Triet's attendance at the VBS festival at the Vietnam Buddhist Institute in Hanoi and his participation in the groundbreaking ceremony for the 2nd phase of construction of the Institute. In HCMC, the VBS organized a major celebration at the city's largest pagoda, which was well attended by local government officials.

UBCV CELEBRATIONS OBSTRUCTED

¶2. (SBU) Throughout most of central and southern Vietnam, the GVN suppressed efforts of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to hold its own Vesak commemorations, said HCMC-based UBCV leader Thich Vien Dinh. He told us by phone that UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and General Secretary Thich Quang Do were kept under strict surveillance and control during this period. In Dinh's case, and in the case of other second-tier UBCV leaders, most UBCV-affiliated pagodas were only able to hold modest prayer services for resident monks and for some worshipers in the immediate neighborhood.

¶3. (SBU) One significant exception was in Ba Ria Vung Tau province near HCMC. According to Thich Vinh Phuoc, a key UBCV leader in the province, he was able to organize a large celebration for 1,500 followers at his pagoda. Phuoc explained that he was able to do so with the understanding that the celebration would not be held under the UBCV banner. He told us that he mentioned the UBCV only once -- and quickly -- in his sermon. Phuoc intentionally did not read from the UBCV Patriarch's Vesak message, which was highly critical of the GVN and of Vietnam being subject to "illegitimate and immoral forces" (Reftel). Phuoc told us that, if he had not avoided mentioning his affiliation with the UBCV, he would not have been able to hold Vesak celebrations. (Note: Thich Vinh Phuoc and his UBCV colleagues in Ba Ria Vung Tau had been under pressure since September 2005 when they announced the formation of a UBCV provincial representative board. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Thich Thien Hanh, the senior UBCV monk in Central Vietnam told us by phone that his congregation in Thua Thien Hue province had managed to hold the Vesak ceremony under the UBCV banner despite numerous warnings and threats from authorities. Prior to the event, the Chief of Staff of Hue City People's Committee sent Hanh a letter ordering him to cancel the "illegal" ceremony. At the same time, local authorities warned monks and believers not to attend as "the UBCV is illegal." They threatened to arrest Thich Thien Hanh and ban him from future religious practice; all other participants "would be dealt with". Thich Thien Hanh told us that he wrote back to Hue

authorities informing them that he planned to go ahead with the Vesak celebrations despite the government threats.

¶5. (SBU) Thich Thien Hanh said that, on the day of the celebration, police set up "roadblocks" to the Quoc An pagoda in what he termed an effort to prevent monks and believers from attending the event. However, approximately 120 monks and 2,000 followers streamed past the police unhindered. All the participants wore badges in Vietnamese that identified themselves as participants in the UBCV's Vesak celebration. Hanh said he was able to read in full the Patriarch's Vesak message, but he believed that it was only partially audible to the audience. He suspected that police tried to interfere with the audio, especially when he was reading Thich Huyen Quang's message condemning the GVN ban of the UBCV and efforts to suppress the UBCV's leadership.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The decision of provincial officials in Ba Ria Vung Tau to allow the UBCV to celebrate Vesak so long as the monks did not advertise their UBCV affiliation is consistent with GVN efforts to push key UBCV provincial leaders -- by blandishments as well as threats -- to join the VBS. More striking is the decision of the Hue authorities not to prevent Thich Thien Hanh from organizing a substantial ceremony under the UBCV banner. The authorities there could have prevented UBCV followers from reaching the pagoda, cut off power to disrupt the event or easily banned Thich Thien Hanh from leaving his pagoda to reach the event site. Hue's Buddhist roots are strong as is the UBCV's presence there. It is possible that the authorities chose not to risk making a scene by physically intervening or disbanding the celebration once it was underway. It is also possible that the GVN sees Thich Thien Hanh as a more moderate alternative successor to the ailing UBCV Patriarch than the more politically hardline Thich Quang Do in HCMC. End Comment.

WINNICK